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# The Effects of Social Proof Through Social Media on Perceptions of Responsibility

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## ABSTRACT

Situational crisis communication theory, also referred to as SCCT, is a central and very well-developed theory in the field of crisis communication. The goal of SCCT is to create a response strategy based on stakeholders' levels of attributions of responsibility. SCCT states there are two main factors stakeholders take into consideration when attributing responsibility to an organization in crisis: crisis type and performance history. While the previously stated factors are very important, the progressive development of social media is not taken into consideration in this theory, specifically the use of social proof through social media channels. According to the principle of social proof, individuals look to the responses of others to determine what constitutes an appropriate action, behavior, opinion, or decision. The following study set out to prove the use of social proof through social media channels is potentially a third factor to take into consideration when determining stakeholders' levels of attribution of responsibility. This study employed the use of an independent samples *t*-test to compare the means of the two conditions, high social proof and low social proof to measure individuals' levels of attribution of responsibility. The hypothesis predicted participants in the high social proof condition would attribute greater responsibility to an organization in crisis than participants in the low social proof condition. The hypothesis was not supported but two main factors potentially contributed to the insignificant results.

The Effects of Social Proof Through Social Media on Perceptions of Responsibility

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication and Sociology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Art

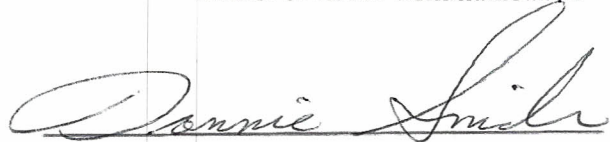
By

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate, Taylor N. Powers, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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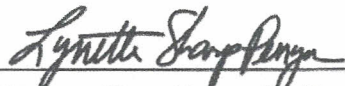


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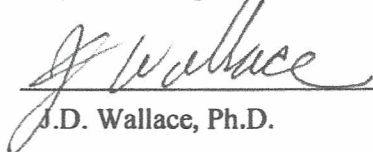
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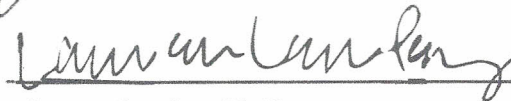
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Social media has changed the way individuals interact with the world. Approximately 2.46 billion individuals worldwide use social media (Statista, 2017). One of the most prominent social media platforms is Facebook, with 2.23 billion monthly active users, according to a 2018 study (Statista, 2018). Individuals not only use social media to connect and communicate with others, but also as a tool for learning and gathering information (Oh & Syn, 2014). For example, according to a Pew Research poll, 62% of adults in the United States use social media to gather news information (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Additionally, research shows that some individuals actively seek information about organizational crises from social media channels more often than from traditional media (Brynielsson, et al., 2017). Since over half of the adult population in America relies on social media to gather information, it is important to understand the effects of crisis news coverage that is shared through social media and the impact it has on an organization's reputation and the outcomes it can produce.

Both scholars and public relations practitioners have begun to recognize the benefits of social media in organizational crisis management. Coombs (2015) emphasizes that organizations must be informed and knowledgeable about social media in order to use it to their advantage when responding to a crisis. For example, organizations can effectively capitalize on the use of social media by using it as a tool during a crisis to

distribute information to stakeholders (Guidry, Jin, Orr, Messner, & Meganck, 2017; Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016) and create a dialogue with stakeholders (Taylor & Perry, 2005). Public relations practitioners emphasize the importance of using social media to connect with stakeholders and build positive rapport (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Social media also allows organizations to market and promote their services to a large audience, thus enhancing the organization's image (Husain et al., 2014). Additionally, studies have shown social media can have both positive and negative impacts on corporate reputation (Zheng, Liu, & Davison, 2018). While social media provides a plethora of benefits for organizations, it can also pose threats to an organization's reputation.

With the rising popularity of social media, it now plays a vital role in the construction of organizational crises (Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). Social media has become the primary channel through which organizations communicate with stakeholders during times of crisis (Zoonen & Meer, 2015). Social media has created a power shift from organizations to consumers (Zamani, Giaglis, & Kasimati, 2015). The organization no longer has total control over what kind of information is shared related to a crisis. Rather, stakeholders now play an active role during crisis situations by creating and sharing content related to the crisis. For example, social media allows dissatisfied customers to publicly share their grievances, which in turn can damage an organization's image (Zamani, Giaglis, & Kasimati, 2015). Additionally, stakeholders can report about a crisis in real time through their social media platforms (i.e., live streaming) (Brynielsson et al., 2017). Social media also allows stakeholders to publish any kind of information

they want about a crisis without the confinement of “journalistic integrity” (Husain et al., 2014).

While crisis scholars have examined social media in crises in a variety of ways, such as the social-mediated crisis communication theory which focuses on social media, traditional crisis management theories have generally not been expanded to account for its effects on organizations (for exceptions see Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2015; Schultz, Utz, & Gortiz, 2011). Specifically, traditional crisis management theories fail to fully incorporate social media’s role in shaping stakeholders’ perceptions of a crisis.

Situational crisis communication theory, or SCCT, is a central theory in the field of crisis communication that has been the focus of a great deal of research (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Dulaney & Gunn, 2018; Ho, Shin, & Pang, 2017; Zhou & Ki, 2018). According to Google Scholar, SCCT has been cited in research thousands of times, and this research has helped to support the validity of the theory (Ki & Nekmet, 2014). SCCT focuses on stakeholders’ attributions of responsibility by providing effective strategies for responding to a crisis to help protect stakeholders and the reputation of the organization (Coombs, 2007a). SCCT is a very well-developed theory that has been applied to various crisis scenarios such as product harms and recalls, accidents, and organizational misdeeds (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; Jeong, 2009). While SCCT acknowledges social media, the theory does not detail how social media might affect attributions of responsibility.

One of the key features in SCCT is determining stakeholder perceptions of organizational responsibility for a crisis. Coombs 2015 identifies several factors

associated with stakeholders' perceptions of organizational responsibility, he does not specify how social media may affect perceptions of organizational responsibility. While Coombs acknowledges the importance of social media in crisis communication, SCCT does not specifically indicate the effects social influence may have in the form of social proof from social media channels. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the effect that information stakeholders share about an organizational crisis through a social media channel, specifically Facebook, can have on stakeholder perceptions of organizational responsibility.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following review of literature first addresses the importance of organizational responsibility by providing an in-depth look at SCCT. Secondly, there is an explanation of how social media impacts crisis communication looking specifically at Facebook as an example. Finally, there is a discussion of how social proof may provide a way to account for the persuasive effect of social media on organizational responsibility in SCCT.

#### **Organizational Crisis and Stakeholder Perception**

Crises cause a breakdown in the organizational system (Coombs, 2015). An organizational crisis “threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously affect an organization’s performance, reputation, and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2015, p. 3).

Organizational reputation concerns how individuals view the organization. The information stakeholders gather while interacting with the organization helps to develop stakeholders’ perceptions of the organization’s reputation (Zoonen & Meer, 2015).

Reputation is a vitally important factor for organizations because it can affect the functioning of an organization. For the organization, the negative outcomes can include financial or reputational loss (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). The breakdown within the system also causes stress and harm for stakeholders.

Stakeholders include any group of individuals involved with an organization in some capacity (Freeman & Reed, 1983). The term *stakeholder* seeks to encompass any individual who is involved in the company in some way, whether they work for the organization or are customers of the organization. Coombs (2015) states there are two types of stakeholders: primary and secondary. While both are equally important, the group primary stakeholder includes individuals who can act to harm or benefit the company, while the secondary stakeholders can affect or be affected by the actions of the organization (Coombs, 2015).

Stakeholders play a vital role in various aspects of crisis management. Not only do organizations seek to protect stakeholders during a crisis, but stakeholders also make judgments about an organization's crisis response. Additionally, stakeholders may play an important role in the creation of a crisis, especially through the use of social media channels (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Omilion-Hodges & McClain, 2016; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Stakeholders' perceptions help to define a crisis (Coombs, 2015).

Crises are not always obvious events. Crises are perceptual. If stakeholders perceive there is a crisis, then the organization faces a crisis (Coombs, 2015). The variable of perception is unique in that stakeholders can hold a lot of the power in deciding if there is a crisis and what the crisis is. Some crises are obvious, while some are not as easily identifiable. For example, a product failure is clearly a crisis but an angry comment posted online by a disgruntled customer could spark outrage, even if the organization is not in the wrong, thus formulating a crisis. In some cases, organizational perceptions of a crisis can differ from stakeholder perceptions, which is why it is so

important to understand how stakeholders view a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). Stakeholder perceptions have great effects on the crisis situation (Coombs, 2015).

In the way that the crisis is somewhat a result of perception, so is the intentionality of the crisis. Crises are perceived as intentional or unintentional, and each type presents unique challenges for an organization's reputation (Coombs, 2015). If stakeholders believe an organization is responsible for a crisis, they might view it as an intentional act, even if that is not the case. Crises boil down to what stakeholders believe happened, which creates a tough situation for organization. Since crises are perception-based, no matter what strategy is employed to respond to a crisis the organization must take into consideration the perceptions of stakeholders. The following section discusses how stakeholders form perceptions or impressions of an organization, which is also referred to as *attribution theory*.

### **Attribution Theory**

In order to explain an event, individuals develop attributions about the situation and those involved. This is especially true during times of negative and unexpected events (Coombs, 2007b). Attribution theory helps to explain how individuals come to make these conclusions and explain their and others' behaviors, or attributions, and how the attributions made affect various situations (McDermont, 2009). Weiner (2015) proposes the guiding principle of attribution theory is that individuals engage in certain behaviors based on their interpretation of causes of events. In order to understand how attributions affect a situation, there must first be an understanding of how attributions are made.

According to McDermont (2009), individuals go through a three-step process when developing attributions. The first step involves an observation of behaviors. The second step is a determination of whether or not the behavior is deliberate. The final step involves a categorization of said behavior. As individuals interact, they assess one another's behaviors to determine whether the behavior is caused by internal or external factors, the two forms of attributions (McDermont, 2009). Internal factors, or dispositional attributions, are developed when an individual sees another's behavior as caused by the person, such as a personality trait or upbringing. The external factor, or situational attribution, is developed when an individual sees the cause of the behavior stemming from an external circumstance.

In order to determine whether the behavior displayed should be attributed to an internal or external cause, Kelley (1971) highlights three guiding factors to take into consideration that help influence individual's attributions: consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness (McDermont, 2009; Zamani, Giaglis, & Kasimati, 2015). If the behavior exhibited matches the behavior of other individuals in the same situation, then there is consensus. Consensus implies that the behavior is normal for all who are involved in this particular type of situation; thus the action will be viewed as an external attribution. If the behavior does not align with how others would act in that situation, then an internal attribution will be made. The second factor, consistency, which is an internal attribution, involves a particular individual's behavior over time. If the individual in the situation behaves the same way in the same situation over time, then her or his behavior is seen as consistent. Kelley's final guideline is "distinctiveness [which] refers to the variations in the observed person's behavior across situations" (McDermont, 2009, p. 61). This



indicates that the individual's behavior is different depending on the situations in which they are involved, which would be considered external. All the previously stated guidelines help an individual to decide whether the behavior they are encountering is an external or internal attribute.

Weiner (1986) uses attribution theory to explain motivations. Weiner proposes three different causal dimensions individuals use when making attributions: controllability, locus, and stability (Coombs, 2004; Jorgensen, 1993). The dimensions controllability and locus seem very similar, but there is a distinct difference between the two. Controllability indicates the extent to which the situation was controllable or uncontrollable by the individuals involved. Theorists such as McAuley, Duncan, and Russell (1992) break the factor of control into two parts, personal control and external control. The locus dimension is similar in that it indicates who is responsible for the situation, which can be internal or external. One element determines how much control one has over the situation, while the other deals with who caused the situation. For example, while an organization could be responsible for a crisis, internal locus, they might have very little control over the crisis. Research has shown there is an overlap between locus and personal control due to the intentionality of the action (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). The final dimension, stability, indicates the frequency of occurrence of the event. If the event occurs frequently then it is seen as stable. If the event does not occur frequently then it is unstable. Similarly, if an organization's actions are seen as stable (i.e., it continually engages in the same behavior), then the attribution made will be dispositional. While consistency is usually seen as a positive characteristic, if the behavior in which the organization is engaging is violating the expectations of

stakeholders, then the attribution can have negative effects on stakeholders' perceptions of the organization.

All the previously stated information and discussed factors contribute to the understanding of how individuals create attributions of others, which can include individuals and organizations. Attribution theory is important for understanding how individuals perceive and develop opinions about organizations, particularly organizations in the midst of crises (Coombs, 2007b). The following section discusses the relationship between attribution theory and crisis communication.

### **Attribution Theory and Crisis Communication**

Crises are the perfect breeding ground for attributions since they are unpredictable (Coombs, 2007b). The attributions stakeholders make about an organization during a crisis are based on the extent to which they see the organization as responsible for the occurrence of the crisis. During crises, the public searches for causes and make attributions about the organization and the crisis in which they are involved (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Not only is it important for crisis managers to understand stakeholders' attributions relating to responsibility in order to create a crisis response, but it is also important for understanding the crisis. Stakeholders' perceptions help the organization to define the crisis, which in turn helps them to create an effective crisis response (Coombs, 2015).

When an organization is faced with a crisis, most of the reputational threat that can or will occur depends on the extent to which stakeholders blame the organization for the crisis (Coombs, 2007b). The three dimensions, controllability, locus, and stability, allow stakeholders to determine whether or not the causes of the crisis are due to internal

factors or external factors. When stakeholders attribute responsibility for the crisis to the organization, a dispositional attribution, then stakeholders may form a negative image of the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). However, if stakeholders attribute the crisis to situational circumstances, then they are less likely to hold the organization responsible, thus leading to a less negative image of the organization (Coombs, 2015).

### **Attribution Theory and SCCT**

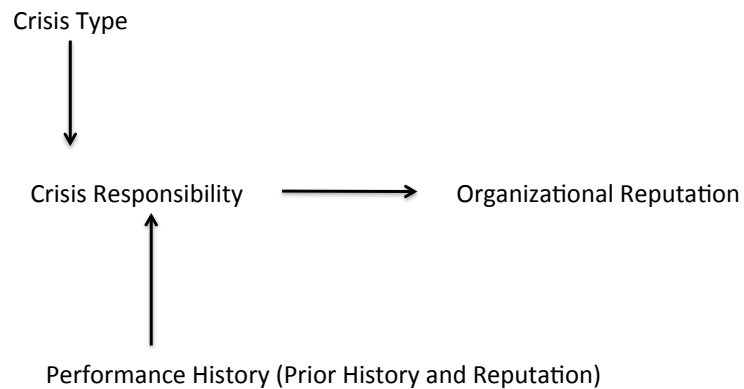
Through the use of communication, one can attempt to alter or influence another's attributions or the feelings an individual ascribes to those attributions (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). This is particularly important when stakeholders hold a negative view of the organization, in that organizations need to use communication to help alter a stakeholder's image of the organization. With the proper communication, an organization can create a crisis response that reduces or even eliminates the negative views stakeholders hold about the organization (Coombs, 2007b). SCCT provides a theoretical framework for understanding how crisis responses can be used to mitigate stakeholder attributions and thus enhance an organization's image.

Attribution theory is the core foundation for SCCT (Coombs, 2007b). According to Coombs (2015), in order to properly respond to a crisis, a crisis manager must assess stakeholders' levels of attribution of responsibility. By assessing these levels, the crisis manager is able to understand the extent to which stakeholders blame the organization for the cause of the crisis, thus allowing for a crisis response to be tailored to fit the needs of the stakeholders. The following section provides an in-depth discussion of SCCT.

## **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

The goal of SCCT is to create a crisis response strategy based on stakeholders' levels of attributions of responsibility. Assessing stakeholders' level of attribution of responsibility is important because it allows the organization to understand how their stakeholders view the crisis. As previously stated, stakeholders hold a lot of the power when it comes to deciding what is a crisis and what is not. Stakeholders' attributions of responsibility can impact an organization's reputation. Stakeholders attribute certain levels of responsibility to the organization, which are dependent on certain factors. Organizations must be aware of all the factors contributing to stakeholders' view of the crisis in order to pick the proper crisis response strategy. The response strategies are intended to protect and/or repair the organization's reputation.

Two factors contribute to attributions of responsibility: crisis type and performance history, which includes prior history and reputation (Coombs, 2015). Crisis type and performance history help stakeholders to create various levels of attributions of responsibility. Once stakeholders have attributed responsibility for the crisis the organization's reputation is affected in some form. The goal of this research is to prove the possibility of another factor's impact on stakeholders' levels of attribution of responsibility, which is labeled as *crisis responsibility* in Figure 1. The relationship between these factors and perceptions of crisis responsibility are visually represented in Figure 1 (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and is explained in the following sections.



*Figure 1: Variables and Relationships in SCCT Two Factors (Adapted from Coombs & Holladay, 2002)*

### **Assessing Stakeholders' Attributions of Responsibility**

In order to evaluate the level of reputational threat, a crisis manager must go through a two-step process. The first step in the process involves identifying the crisis type. Each crisis type is associated with a different level of responsibility attributed by stakeholders, making it important to properly identify the crisis type. There are three categories, referred to as *clusters*, in which an organizational crisis can fall: the preventable cluster, the accidental cluster, or the victim cluster (Coombs, 2015). Several crisis types, with similar levels of perceived responsibility, can be placed in each category. Stakeholders attribute a different degree of responsibility to each crisis cluster.

In the preventable cluster, stakeholders place most, if not all, of the blame for the crisis on the organization, since the crisis is perceived as preventable. Crisis types that fall within the preventable cluster include human-error accidents, human-error product

harm, and organizational misdeeds (Coombs, 2015). Crises involving accidents or product defects caused by human error should be placed in the preventable cluster, as well as actions that threaten stakeholders or are illegal. Stakeholders attribute the highest level of responsibility to an organization when a crisis falls in the preventable cluster.

In the accidental cluster, very little of the blame is placed on the organization because the crisis is perceived to be unintentional. The accidental cluster includes technical-error accident, technical-error product harm, and challenge crises (Coombs, 2015). These crises occur when the technology or equipment owned by the organization malfunctions and causes harm to employees, stakeholders, or production, or stakeholders are discontent with organizational behaviors. For example, in the case of the Malden Mills plant fire in 1995, stakeholders did not place large amounts of blame on the organization, since the crisis was unintentional (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). Stakeholders attribute minimal levels of responsibility to an organization when a crisis falls in the accidental cluster.

Finally, in the victim cluster, the level of responsibility attributed by stakeholders is very low, and in some cases none existent, compared to the other two clusters. Crises in this cluster are seen as unavoidable and not a direct result of any organizational actions. The victim cluster includes crises such as natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and malevolence (Coombs, 2015). Organizations do not need to take responsibility for crises that fall within this cluster because stakeholders view the organization as a victim of the crisis.

According to Coombs (2007b), once the first step is completed, identifying the crisis type, the crisis manager can move on to the second step of the process. The second

step is to evaluate the performance history of the organization. Performance history is represented by two intensifying factors: prior history and reputation (Coombs, 2015). As shown above, Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how these two factors combined to contribute to attributions of responsibility.

Coombs (2007b) refers to the terms consistency and distinctiveness, which are derived from Kelley's principles of covariance, to describe and explain prior history and prior reputation. Consistency involves the prior history of the organization, meaning if an organization has experienced similar crises in the past, then there is a greater potential for reputational threat (Coombs, 2007b). Reoccurring crises indicate that there are underlying issues the organization has yet to solve. If there are high levels of consistency, which means this is not the first time the organization has faced this type of crisis, then there will be a greater level of attribution of responsibility, which in turn leads to greater levels of reputational threat (Coombs, 2007b). The second factor, distinctiveness, concerns the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007b). Poor reputation indicates lower levels of distinctiveness. If stakeholders feel as though the organization does not treat them well or care about their needs, then they will react negatively to the organization, attributing greater organizational responsibility for the crisis which produces higher levels of reputational threat (Coombs, 2007b).

Performance history, prior history and prior reputation, can amplify the reputational threat of the crisis and increase stakeholders' levels of attributions of responsibility (Coombs, 2015). For example, if an organization is faced with an accidental crisis, normally, the levels of responsibility are low. However, if the organization has faced a similar crisis before or has a negative reputation among

stakeholders, then stakeholders may not view the crisis as accidental (Coombs, 2015).

Rather, they will see it as a preventable crisis, attributing higher levels of responsibility to the organization for the crisis.

Performance history includes factors that help to adjust the initial assessment of the crisis in relation to reputational threat (Coombs, 2007b). Prior crisis history and negative reputation amplify crises due to the fact that these are controllable factors. Once the crisis type has been identified and the performance history has been assessed, a crisis communication manager can begin the process of choosing the appropriate crisis response.

### **Choosing a Crisis Response**

Accommodation level of crisis response strategy must match the stakeholders' attribution level. The responses the organization gives for crises are called postures (Coombs, 2015). These postures include denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. Numerous combinations of responses can be made with these four postures (Coombs, 2015). Within these postures are various crisis response strategies. The objective of these response strategies is to appropriately accommodate the amount of responsibility attributed to the organization (Coombs, 2015).

There are two postures that attempt to regain stakeholders' trust: bolstering and rebuilding. Bolstering includes reminding, ingratiation, and victimage (Coombs, 2015). Specifically referring to the reminding strategy, the organization is trying to remind stakeholders of the organization's past good deeds. The bolstering posture cannot be the only strategy used in a crisis response. If an organization were to only use the bolstering posture the stakeholders could perceive the organization as being haughty in the response



(Coombs, 2015). The core intent of the response strategies within the bolstering posture is to create a positive relationship between the organization and stakeholders (Coombs, 2015). Similarly, the rebuilding posture attempts to regain stakeholders' trust. This posture should be used for crises in the preventable cluster, as well as crises in the accidental cluster, only if the organization has a negative performance history (Coombs, 2015). The objective of the responses within the rebuilding posture is to reestablish a positive reputation among stakeholders by accepting responsibility for the crisis. With the rebuilding posture, the organization can either use apology or compensation as a response strategy (Coombs, 2015). These postures illustrate the organization's acceptance of the attributed responsibility for the crisis by stakeholders and their objective to rebuild their reputation.

If an organization believes they are not entirely, or not at all, responsible for the crisis, then they should use the diminishment or denial posture. The two response strategies included in the diminishment posture are excusing and justification (Coombs, 2015). The diminishment posture acknowledges the existence of the crisis, whereas the denial posture denies the existence of the crisis. With the denial posture, the organization is attempting to tarnish the reputation of its accusers and assure stakeholders that the crisis does not exist or involve them (Coombs, 2015). The responses used in the denial posture correlate with crises within the victim cluster. Stakeholders must believe the organization is not responsible for the crisis in order for this response to be effective, because the organization will not accept responsibility, or they will attempt to place blame on another (Coombs, 2015). If the organization denies the crisis but the stakeholders believe the organization is actually responsible, then the organization has the

potential to offend stakeholders, causing them not to trust the organization. Stakeholders could see the denial was a way to distract or refocus the fault of the crisis onto another. Denial is an effective response strategy for crises involving unwarranted rumors and challenges (Coombs, 2015).

In summary, in order for organizations to properly respond to a crisis, they must know what type of crises they are dealing with and be aware of the performance history, which include the intensifying factors prior history and reputation. While the goal of a crisis response is to repair the organization's image, Coombs (2015) makes it very clear a crisis manager's first priority is to protect stakeholders from harm. Once the organization informs stakeholders about how to protect themselves, then the organization can move on to protecting the reputation of the organization. Any ethical crisis response has a duty to uphold the priority of stakeholder safety (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). When it comes to protecting or repairing the reputation of the organization there are various different strategies that can be employed through the use of SCCT. With SCCT, the organization is able to identify the crisis type then place it in the appropriate cluster based upon the crises' characteristics and the amount of crisis responsibility the stakeholders attribute to the organization. While the previously stated factors are vitally important to consider when deciding how to respond to a crisis, there may be other important factors.

Coombs (2015) claims that social media can play a significant role in a crisis response. According to Coombs (2015), not only can social media be used by the organization as a medium for responding to the crisis, but it can also be the medium through which stakeholders gather and share information pertaining to the nature of the crisis, which is also referred to as secondary crisis communication, which will be defined

in the next section. Coombs indicates that crisis managers need to be aware of what is occurring on social media during crises, but he does not account for the potential unique effects of social media in SCCT. The following section provides an overview of the concept of social media, how it relates to crisis communication, and one possible way in which SCCT could be expanded to include the effects of social media.

### **Social Media**

The Internet has become a hub for sharing information in society, specifically through social media. Social media has attracted billions of users (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Social media allows for individuals to connect with one another in a more efficient way (Johnston, Tanner, Lalla, & Kawalski, 2010; Weaver & Morris, 2008). Various age groups use social media to interact with others. Eighty-eight percent of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 year of age use at least one form of social media platforms (Murnane, 2018). Social media is “an umbrella term that is used to refer to a new era of Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). Some examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These various social media sites allow for the creation of communities through which individuals share and co-create information (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

Social media has many unique characteristics. Boyd and Ellison (2007) explain that social media

allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a

connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 221)

An aspect that is important to highlight is the profile one can create through social media. A profile is created through the use of various questions that relate to aspects of the individuals, “such as age, location, interest, and an ‘about me’ section” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 221). Profiles help individuals to identify with whom they are connecting. Individuals create communities with those who share similar interest and values by “adding” them to their community (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Given its representative characteristics of social media and prominence among social media outlets, Facebook was the social media platform used in this study.

Facebook’s mission is to “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (Facebook, n.d.). Facebook was originally created to help college students connect with others on their campus. However, it is now the most popular and widely used social media site, with 2.23 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018). According to a study conducted by Pew, 68% of adults online have used Facebook (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Additionally, Forbes stated that 50 million businesses use Facebook, and the number is steadily rising (Chaykowski, 2015).

### **Purpose of Social Media**

Social media allows individuals to connect with others without the restriction of geographical location. In its earlier forms, communities created through social media reflected users’ real-life communities, but now that is not the case (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Social media is now used not only to connect with those one knows in real life but also to connect with strangers. Not only does social media allow individuals to bypass

geographical and demographic boundaries, but it also allows for more accessible contact with entities such as organization, governments, and political parties just to name a few (Salgur, 2016).

Social media also provides a platform for individuals to share information in a quick and efficient manner, which is why individuals increasingly rely on it as a way to stay connected to the world around them (Salgur, 2016). Over time, social media is replacing traditional media like newspapers and television as a medium for individuals to share and gather information (Haataja, Laajalahti, & Hyvarinen, 2016; Osatuyi, 2013). For example, studies have shown that some social media users perceive information shared through social media as more “authentic and credible” than information from traditional forms of media (Horrigan & Morris, 2005; Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). The importance of social media during crisis communication is also seen through the development of various theories that specifically revolve around the use of social media, such as the social-mediated crisis communication theory created by Jin and Liu (2010). As previously stated, 62% of American adults use social media as method of gathering news information (Statista, 2017). Thus, it is important for organizational managers to understand the effects social media can have on the organization during a crisis.

### **Social Media and Crisis Communication**

Coombs (2015) claims that the Internet has revolutionized the crisis communication process. Social media provides a platform for crisis managers to distribute crisis messages, as well as providing stakeholders the opportunity to interact with the organization throughout the crisis (Coombs, 2015). With social media,

stakeholders are also able to share information about the crisis among one another (Coombs, 2015). The use of social media is no longer simply an option for crisis managers; rather they now must focus on how they will use social media (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014).

Understanding the effects social media can have on stakeholders is essential for crisis managers. Yet many crisis managers still do not understand how to utilize this medium properly (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Crisis response managers are motivated to use social media because it allows them to directly communicate with stakeholders in a quick and widespread manner. Crisis managers can use social media to stay in constant contact with stakeholders during a crisis and provide answers to their questions, which in turn can help crisis managers to better understand the needs of the stakeholders (Hurk, 2013; Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016). The use of social media allows for situational awareness, making stakeholders aware of the current crisis, and responsible relationships to be built between the organization and stakeholders (Haataja, Laajalahti, & Hyvarinen, 2016).

While social media presents vast amounts of opportunities for organizations involved in crisis, it also can lead to negative implications for the organization. Studies have shown that if poor communication is used on social media, it can actually amplify the crisis (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Without proper training and awareness of the implications of using social media to respond to a crisis, crisis managers can misuse social media during a crisis and make the situation worse. Additionally, the introduction of social media has begun to mitigate organizations' power over consumers (Kietzmann,

Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Stakeholders now play an active role in the creation of crises.

Public participation in crisis management has become the new norm (Baron, 2010; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014). Individuals are no longer passive actors during a crisis; social media allows stakeholders to be a part of the crisis communication response (Omilion-Hodges & McClain, 2016; Veil, Buehner, Palenchar, & Michael, 2011). Social media allows stakeholders to share both positive and negative experiences related to the organization and the crisis, and this is particularly important when stakeholders are sharing negative experiences during times of organizational crisis.

Secondary crisis communication, SCC, refers to stakeholders' ability and willingness to share information and leave negative opinions, relating to a crisis, of an organization through the use social media channels (Bi, Zheng, & Liu, 2014; Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). Since social media is a medium through which individuals engage in SCC, stakeholders are able to not only share facts about a crisis or an organization, but they are also able to comment on and give their own opinion about the situation, which can be considered word-of-mouth information (Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009). Coombs and Holladay (2007) propose social media "is an electronic form of word-of-mouth" (p. 304). Word-of-mouth can have significant impacts on consumers' views of organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). This presents a unique aspect for crisis managers in that stakeholders are able to share their opinions about the crisis with those within their social media communities. Studies have shown that secondary crisis communication spreads the crisis event and can potentially lead to new crises due to the dynamic shifting of conversations about crises through social media channels (Luo &

Zhai, 2017). Similarly, Zheng, Liu, and Davison (2018) found that SCC affected stakeholder expressions in that they were more likely to post their opinions when they perceived more support for them from others. Since social media communities are formed based on shared values and interest, individuals communicating within this medium may be drawn to conforming to the thoughts and opinions of those around them, a phenomenon known as *social proof*. The effects of secondary crisis communication on stakeholders' attribution of responsibility are unknown, but the social proof literature provides a possible framework for understanding its effect on crisis responsibility in SCCT. The following section discusses the theory of social proof and its possible relation and effect on stakeholder perceptions of crisis responsibility

### **Social Proof**

Social proof is defined as “the tendency to view behaviors as more appropriate or correct when a lot of other people are engaging in such behaviors” (Gass & Seiter, 2014, p.132). According to the principle of social proof, individuals look to the responses of others to determine what constitutes as an appropriate action, behavior, opinion, or decision (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, & Gornik-Durose, 2001). Typically, this means individuals tend to act similarly to their peers and friends. Individuals look to others to help inform the way they act because they perceive others as possessing more knowledge than they do about a particular situation (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2005).

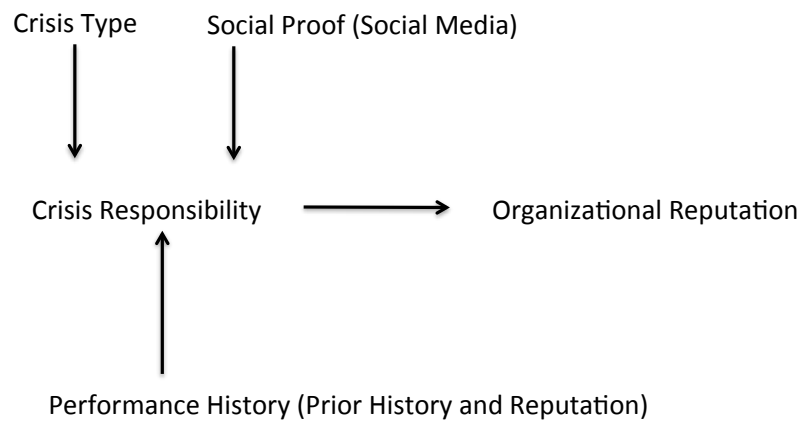
Prior research has proven that social proof can induce compliance. For example, studies have shown that when high social proof was present, students were more likely to donate to a charity than those who were not exposed to high social proof (Shearman & Yoo, 2007). Similarly, the use of social proof can help direct actions such as making



healthy choices at the supermarket (Salmon, De Vet, Adriaanse, Fennis, & De Ridder, 2015), reusing towels during a hotel visit (Goldstein, Cialdini & Griskevicius, 2008), and influencing willingness to participate in a survey (Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, & Gornik-Durose, 2001). The previously stated studies are just a few instances in which social proof plays a vital role in shaping individuals' actions.

Social proof is likely to occur in the social media context in general and the crisis context in particular. As stated in the previous section, individuals create communities based on shared values and interest. The purpose of social media is connectedness. Individuals engage in social media based on activities in order to connect with others and build communities. For example, Facebook users typically limit their community to family or personal friends, or at least an individual they have met in person at some point in time (Miller & Melton, 2015). Research shows Facebook communities have persuasive effects on new articles and information during times of crisis (Winter, Bruckner, & Kramer, 2015). Similarly, studies have shown social proof affects buyer intentions and trust of the organization (Talib & Saat, 2017). Specifically, information collected through social communities, such as those created through social media platforms, contribute to and influence individuals' attributions (Talib & Saat, 2017). Crises create situations in which stakeholders seek information; thus they turn to others for answers, which makes social media an important factor during crises. Individuals tend to look to the opinions of others in their social media networks to determine whether or not they should engage in secondary crisis communication (Zheng, Liu, & Davison, 2018). Social media plays a vital role in how individuals collect information about a crisis.

To summarize, individuals not only turn to social media to gather and share information, but they also turn toward others within their social media communities to inform their own behavior. Since social media is widely accepted as a medium through which to gather information, it is important to understand how social media can inform individuals' perceptions and attributions of an organizational crisis. SCCT, a vital theory in the field of crisis communication, can be used to understand how stakeholders attribute responsibility to an organization in crisis by examining crisis type and performance history, yet it does not take into account how social media could affect attributions of responsibility, specifically the use of social proof through social media channels. Social proof may be a vital factor in assessing how social media affects stakeholders' crisis perceptions and thus is potentially a third factor to take into consideration when assessing and determining stakeholders' levels of attribution of responsibility. Based on previously cited literature, the following hypothesis is advanced: Participants in the high social proof condition will attribute greater responsibility to an organization in crisis than participants in the low social proof condition. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of how social proof through social media may affect crisis responsibility in the SCCT model.



*Figure 2: Variables and Relationships in SCCT Three Factors(Adapted from Coombs & Holladay, 2002)*

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The following section discusses the methods used to perform this study. This portion includes a description of the participants and the procedure. The following includes an in-depth explanation of the design of the study and the material used in this experiment. Finally, there is a description of the manipulation check and measures.

#### **Participants and Procedures**

Participants ( $n = 73$ ) were graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in a wide variety of courses at a private southwestern university. The majority identified as female ( $n = 78.1\%$ ), and a minority identified as male ( $n = 21.9\%$ ). Additionally, individuals partaking in this study fell within ages ranging from 18 to 33 ( $M = 22.32$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ). Participants were asked to indicate how often they use social media on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). According to the results, participants indicated they use social media very frequently ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ), making them an appropriate sample to survey for this study.

Participants were provided with a link to the online experiment via email. Participants were randomly assigned, by clicking on the link, to either the low social proof ( $n = 37$ ) or high social proof ( $n = 36$ ) condition. After reading a short introduction, participants viewed the screenshot of a hypothetical crisis communication scenario post shared via Facebook. All participants then completed a questionnaire measuring

perceptions of organizational responsibility, demographics (i.e., age, gender, and rates of social media usage), and a manipulation check. Following the questionnaire, participants were shown an exit page and thanked.

### **Design and Materials**

The stimulus material used for this study was an adaptation of stimulus material used by Coombs, Holladay, and Claeys (2016). The stimulus involved a company accused of charging customers for unnecessary car repairs. The original crisis was a real life incident involving Sears in the 1980s. To avoid the effects of prior performance history, Sears was referred to as AutomotiveX in this study.

A between-subject design manipulated the level of social proof (high versus low) associated with a Facebook post to determine if there was any effect on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization. Much of the prior research on social proof has used ambiguous terminology about the behavior of a referent group to create various levels of social proof. For example, Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, and Gornik-Durose (2001) told participants that “all” (high social proof), “half” (moderate social proof), or “none” (low social proof) of their classmates complied with a similar request (p. 1246). Similarly, Shearman and Yoo (2007) created a high social proof condition by using the phrase “lots of students like you” (p. 275). Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius (2008) used the phrase “most of the hotel guests” to entice hotel guests to reuse their towels during their stay (p. 474). Since prior research does not provide concrete numbers for indicating various levels of social proof, this research instantiated social proof through both linguistic and numerical manipulations.

Social proof was manipulated in two ways for each condition. First, it was manipulated linguistically through the instructions. The low social proof instructions stated the following: “Please read the following post shared by a news outlet you follow. As you can see from the post below, few people have reacted to this post. After reading the post, please answer the questions that follow based on your perceptions of the post” (see Appendix B). In contrast, the high social proof instructions stated the following: “Please read the following post shared by a news outlet you follow. As you can see from the post below, many people have reacted to this post. After reading the post, please answer the questions that follow based on your perceptions of the post.”

Second, social proof was manipulated through the number of reactions (i.e., likes, shares, and comments) depicted in the Facebook post (see Appendix B). The high social proof condition indicated the post had 5,000 likes, 2,600 comments, and 1,500 shares. The number of reactions for the high social proof condition was based on various news posts found on Facebook from credible news stations. The posts used for this study came from CNN and the Huffington Post Facebook pages (2018), relating to a crisis involving Starbucks. The purpose of using these particular posts is due to the fact the crisis was very recent at the time and was a widely discussed topic on social media platforms. Each post had a few thousand likes, comments, and shares (CNN, 2018; Huffington Post, 2018), thus the high social proof post followed the same pattern. Additionally, the low social proof condition post only had 10 likes, 5 comments, and 3 shares. While many posts on popular news outlets social media pages normally gain more traction than this, this study attempted to show a drastic difference between the two conditions in terms of

likes, comments, and shares. The reason for including the number of likes, comments, and shares for each post was to make the Facebook posts look as realistic as possible.

### **Manipulation Check**

A manipulation check was conducted to ensure proper manipulation of social proof. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to respond to the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree): “A lot of people reacted to the post,” and “Few people reacted to the post.” All participants correctly answered both manipulation questions. Thus, they were retained for the analysis.

### **Measures**

Perceptions of organizational crisis responsibility were measured using Coombs and Holladay’s (2007) five-item responsibility scale (see Appendix B). Participants indicated their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Sample items included, “The cause of the crisis was something the organization could have controlled,” and “The blame for the incident lies in the circumstance, not the organization.” Three of the five items on the scale are reverse worded. Prior research indicates this scale is reliable with a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of .78 - .81 (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The following provides a summary of the results of this study. First, there is a discussion of the results of the manipulation check. Next, there is a discussion of the results of the tested hypothesis. This study employed SPSS to examine the data.

First, independent *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether or not the manipulation was successful. An independent *t*-test of the first item revealed a significant difference between the conditions,  $t(71) = -7.76, p = .00$ . Participants in the low social proof condition agreed less ( $M = 2.24, SD = 1.62$ ) than participants in the high social proof ( $M = 5.17, SD = 1.60$ ) condition that a lot of people reacted to the post. Similarly, an independent *t*-test of the second item revealed a significant difference between the conditions,  $t(71) = 7.63, p = .00$ . Participants in the low social proof condition agreed more ( $M = 5.49, SD = 1.64$ ) than participants in the high social proof ( $M = 2.61, SD = 1.57$ ) condition that few people reacted to the post. Thus, the manipulation was successful. Table 1 summarizes the results of the manipulation check.

Table 1

*T-Test Results Comparing High and Low Social Proof on Manipulation Check*

<i>Variable</i>	<u>Low Social Proof</u>		<u>High Social Proof</u>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
A lot of people reacted	2.24	1.62	5.17	1.60	-7.76	71	.00
Few people reacted	5.49	1.64	2.61	1.57	7.63	71	.00



The hypothesis predicted participants in the high social proof condition would attribute greater responsibility to an organization in crisis than participants in the low social proof condition. After reverse scoring the data, a reliability analysis revealed the scale used for this test was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ). The scale items were averaged to yield an overall score. Higher scores indicated higher levels of attribution of responsibility. The data were analyzed using an independent samples *t*-test to compare the means of the high social proof and low social proof conditions. This test revealed that the low social proof condition ( $M = 5.18, SD = 1.02$ ) did not significantly differ from the high social proof condition ( $M = 5.48, SD = 0.89$ ),  $t(71) = -1.36, p = .09, d = 0.3$ . Thus, the hypothesis was not supported. Table 2 summarizes the results of the independent samples *t*-test.

Table 2

*T-Test Results Comparing High and Low Social Proof on Attributions of Responsibility*

<i>Variable</i>	<u>Low Social Proof</u>		<u>High Social Proof</u>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Attributions of Responsibility	5.18	1.02	5.48	0.89	-1.36	71	.09

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

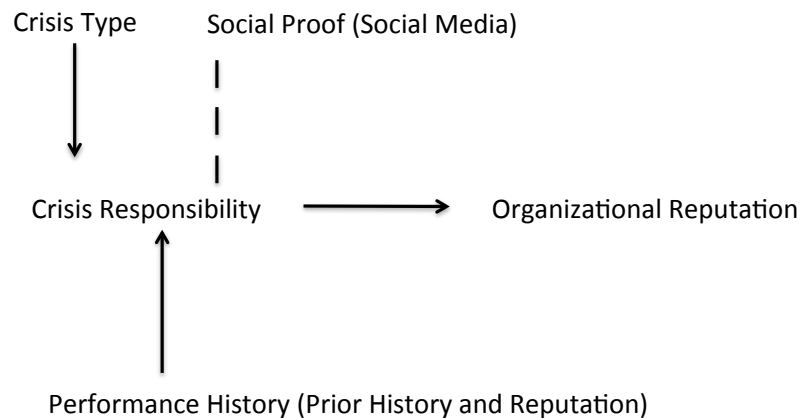
The following provides a discussion of the findings of the present study.

Following the discussion of the findings is an explanation of the implications of the study and the major limitations to the research. Finally, there are suggestions for future research.

As discussed in the literature review, SCCT states that attributions of responsibility are determined by two main factors, crisis type and performance history (Coombs, 2015). This research argued the possibility of a third factor, which is the use of social proof through social media channels. The present research attempted to make a connection between attributions of responsibility and social proof used through social media channels. Prior research has proven that individuals look to others to inform their own behaviors and opinions (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert 2005). Individuals tend to agree with the popular opinion of those around them, and social media is now a prominent channel through which an individual can gather information and communication. Thus, social media has the potential to shape opinions during organizational crises (Winter, Bruckner, & Kramer, 2015).

The study tested the impact of the use of social proof through social media channels and the potential impact it has on stakeholders' levels of attribution of responsibility. The hypothesis predicted participants in the high social proof condition

would attribute greater responsibility to an organization in crisis than participants in the low social proof condition. Findings revealed that social proof, the number of reactions (i.e., likes, comments, and shares), related to a crisis post did not significantly impact stakeholders' attributions of responsibility (see Figure 3). The high social proof condition indicated a slightly higher mean (attribution of responsibility), but it was not significantly different from the low social proof condition. Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported despite expectations. There are several possible explanations that may account for the results of this study. While this study showed social media might not have as much of an impact on stakeholders' attributions of responsibility as predicted, it does bring to light some other important aspects.



*Figure 3: Variables and Relationships in SCCT: Social Media Not a Factor*  
(Adapted from Coombs & Holladay, 2002)

The present findings, though insignificant, may have implications for the crisis communication arena, specifically SCCT. The most prominent implication is that of industry reputation. While Coombs (2015) emphasizes the importance of an organization prior reputation he does not highlight how the reputation of an industry can impact a crisis. According to a 2016 study, 66% of drivers do not trust vehicle repair shops (Mello, 2016). The fact that the crisis concerned the automotive industry may have produced a ceiling effect for responsibility attributions, making social proof irrelevant.

Another implication is that social media potentially plays a vital role in constructing stakeholder's levels of attribution of responsibility, but not the use of social proof through social media. Social media has many different aspects and features, which makes it possible that another feature of social media could impact attributions of responsibility. Social proof is merely the content while social media is the context, and according to Schultz, Utz, and Goritz (2011), the context or "medium" matters more than the content of the message. Social proof is merely one aspect of social media; thus there are potentially other aspects that could impact stakeholders' levels of attribution of responsibility.

### **Limitations**

The following section provides an explanation of the limitations of this study, which includes the sample size and the crisis type. A possible reason for the insignificant results could be attributed to the sample size, which included only 73 participants. Calculating the effect size for the *t*-test puts the results in perspective and helps to determine the effectiveness of the test. Given the small effect size (Cohen's  $d = .3$ ), sample size ( $n = 73$ ), and alpha level ( $p = .05$ ), the power for a one-tailed test was .35.

This means there was only a 35% chance of obtaining a statistically significant result. It is possible that there is a difference between high and low social proof conditions. However, the experiment did not have enough statistical power to detect a difference that might exist. The minimum sample size needed to give a reasonable chance of detecting a difference between groups was calculated. Given the effect size ( $d = .3$ ), a “standard” power level (.8), and a standard alpha level ( $p = .05$ ), the results indicated the experiment would have needed a total sample size of 278 participants (or 139 per condition) to detect a potential difference between groups. Additionally, it is important to add that most participants indicated they regularly used social media, but it is possible the few outliers could have significantly impacted the results of the study. Due to the size of the sample, anyone that completed the survey and passed the manipulation check were retained for the study.

Another factor that may have contributed to the insignificant results is the content of the post. The lines above and below the picture that described the crisis scenario were the same in both conditions and may have been all participants needed to determine the company was responsible. The crisis type used for this experiment could be categorized as a management misconduct crisis, which falls within the preventable cluster (Coombs, Holladay, & Claeys, 2016). As previously discussed, a crisis that falls within the preventable cluster involves crises that were caused by human error or due to internal factors, as discussed in the attribution theory (Coombs, 2015). Stakeholders attribute the highest level of responsibility to an organization when a crisis falls in the preventable cluster. This may have resulted in a ceiling effect for attributions of responsibility since stakeholders attribute high levels of responsibility to organizations for crises that fall

within this cluster (Coombs, 2007c). Since this crisis is seen as something that could be controlled by the organization, also referred to as internal locus of control in the attribution theory, stakeholders will assign higher levels of attribution of responsibility. (Coombs, 2015 Jorgensen, 1993; Liu et al., 2015; Lyon & Cameron, 2004; Weiner, 1986). As discussed in the review of literature, according to attribution theory, internal locus of control, meaning the organization had control over the crisis and thus implying the stakeholders perceived the organization as causing the crisis because the organization knew or at least should have known that the employees were charging customers for unnecessary repairs meant that the crisis was viewed as controllable (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014). This may account for why there was no significant difference between the high social proof and low social proof conditions.

Finally, one aspect that could significantly impact this study is crystalizing the understanding and relationship between social media and social proof. As previously stated, social media is the context and social proof is the content. While these two aspects seem very intertwined, it would be beneficial to look at them separately and understand the potential implications of each variable individually. Creating a better understanding of these two variables could help to produce significant results.

### **Future Research**

Future research is needed to further investigate the potential connection between social proof through social media and attributions of responsibility. The correction of the limitations of this study may allow further exploration of the predicted effects. Two major changes to the research methodology could potentially yield different, significant

results. The two major limitations of this research included the sample size and the crisis scenario type.

First, the sample size used in this study was too small to yield significant results. Therefore, the implementation of a larger sample size has the potential to produce a significant difference between the high social proof condition and the low social proof condition. Also, removing those who do not use social media often could significantly impact the results of the study. If the study was only to employ individuals who use social media regularly, it is possible to yield different results. While changing the sample size and make up could result in different results, it may not be as feasible as changing the crisis scenario type used for the study.

Secondly, changing the crisis type could drastically change the results of the study. SCCT provides three different clusters under which a crisis can fall, and within each cluster, stakeholders attribute varying levels of responsibility to the organization for a crisis. Rather than using a management misconduct crisis, the crisis type employed in this study, future research could use a challenge crisis. In a challenge crisis, some stakeholders perceive there to be a crisis, while others may not. In this crisis type, stakeholders believe the organization is acting in an inappropriate manner. However, they do not attribute a great deal of responsibility to the organization (Coombs, 2007b). A challenge crisis would fall under the accidental cluster, which means stakeholders hold minimal levels of responsibility. In a challenge crisis situation, what social media communities discuss about a crisis through secondary crisis communication may have an effect. In other words, because responsibility is less clear, stakeholders may look to others on social media to determine what they should think about the crisis event.

Finally, looking into industry history and reputation could have significant impacts in future research. This study argued that there is potentially a third factor that impacts stakeholders' levels of attribution of responsibility, and while the study proved the third factor was not the use of social proof through social media, it is possible a variable such as industry history could be a third factor.

### **Conclusion**

This study tested whether or not social proof through social media played a role in SCCT, specifically in shaping stakeholders' levels of attributions of responsibility. The tested factors did not support the ideas presented in this study. The results indicated there was no significant difference between high and low social proof conditions in relation to levels of attribution of responsibility. Several factors may have contributed to the insignificant results, such as a small sample size and the crisis type. Though the results were insignificant, the arguments made throughout this study indicate the value of studying social proof through social media within the field of crisis communication, specifically within SCCT. Due to the ever-changing environment of organizations and organizational crisis, especially the implementation of social media, it is important to search for various factors that could potentially impact stakeholders' perceptions of organizational crises.



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## APPENDIX A

### Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter

#### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

**Office of Research and Sponsored Programs**

320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



June 29, 2018

Taylor Powers

Department of Communication and Sociology

Box 28156, Abilene Christian University

Dear Taylor,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "The Impact of Social Proof on SCCT Through Social Media"

(IRB# 18-045 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Our Promise: ACU is a vibrant, innovative, Christ-centered community that engages students in authentic spiritual and intellectual growth, equipping them to make a real difference in the world.

## APPENDIX B

### Measure

Instructions: Think about the information you have just read. The items below concern your impression of the company AutomotiveX and some questions about you.

\*1. Circumstances, not the organization, are responsible for this incident.

Strongly Disagree				Unsure			Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

2. The blame for the incident lies with the organization.

Strongly Disagree				Unsure			Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

\*3. The blame for the incident lies in the circumstance, not the organization.

Strongly Disagree				Unsure			Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

4. The cause of the crisis was something the organization could have controlled.

Strongly Disagree				Unsure			Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

\*5. The cause of the crisis is something over which the organization HAD NO power.

Strongly Disagree				Unsure			Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

6. I frequently use social media.

Strongly Disagree

Unsure

Strongly Agree

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

7. Please indicate your age.

8. Please indicate your gender.

Female

Male

Prefer not to identify

9. A lot of people reacted to the post.

Strongly Disagree

Unsure

Strongly Agree

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

10. Few people reacted to the post.

Strongly Disagree

Unsure

Strongly Agree

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

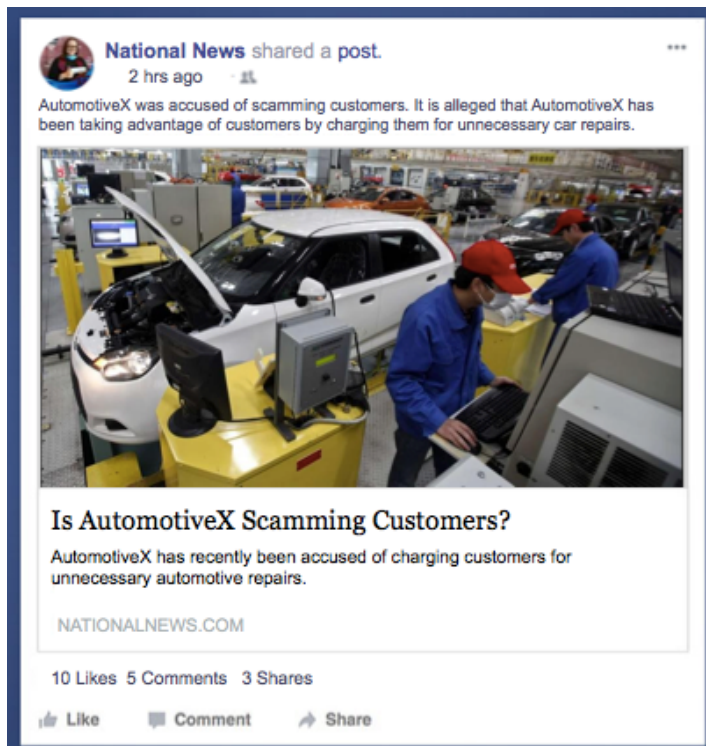
\*Reverse Items: 1, 3, and 5

## APPENDIX C

### Stimulus

#### *Condition 1: Low Social Proof*

Please read the following post shared by a news outlet you follow. As you can see from the post below, few people have reacted to this post. After reading the post, please answer the questions that follow based on your perceptions of the post.





## *Condition 2: High Social Proof*

Please read the following post shared by a news outlet you follow. As you can see from the post below, many people have reacted to this post. After reading the post, please answer the questions that follow based on your perceptions of the post.

